Fourth of July in the Heartland

By MICHAEL MORAIN

With parades, flags, picnics and fireworks, American families in a small town in Iowa remember the meaning of Independence Day.

MIKE JAEGER

As soon as Kathy Templeton wakes up on the Fourth of July, she steps out to the front porch of her tidy yellow farmhouse in southern Iowa and raises the American flag. Few people will drive past on the gravel road and see it, but the ritual is part of her Independence Day routine—a routine she's followed for as many of her 53 years as she can remember.

"I look forward to the whole day," she says. "I put the flag out and try to figure out what red, white and blue to wear."

Once dressed, she packs a bag with a jacket, an umbrella and a tube of sunscreen, and fills a cooler full of watermelon. "It's all about the watermelon," she says, adding that the first batch of sweet corn is usually ripe by July, too. "They used to say corn was 'knee-high by the Fourth of July,' but now [with improved farming techniques] it's 'as high as an elephant's eye.' "

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Above: Everyone is welcome to join the Independence Day parade in Lamoni, Iowa. Curtis Roberts, in his flag bedecked toy fire truck, gets help from his mother, Karen, and sister, Erin.

Right: Dallas Tellef, 2, and his sister Krissa, 5, join hundreds of people lining the streets to watch the parade go by in Anchorage, Alaska, a city that's too big for everyone to join in the marching.

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Brittany Larson rides her red, white and blue bicycle down Main Street on the Fourth of July, carrying on a tradition for young girls in her hometown, Lamoni.

With the bag slung over her shoulder and the watermelon packed in ice, Templeton and her family drive a few kilometers to the small town of Lamoni—a two-hour drive north of Kansas City—where she works as a secretary at a private university. She'll spend the rest of the day watching the parade, chatting with neighbors and, after sunset, enjoying the annual fireworks display. "I look at it as family time," she says.

For many Americans, like Templeton, the Fourth of July is a mix of patriotic spirit and family fun. Although officials plan elaborate events in Washington, D.C., and each of the 50 state capitals, small towns scattered throughout the Midwest celebrate the day with a particular blend of time-honored tradition and creative gusto.

And the 1,200 people of Lamoni, like those in small towns everywhere, boast that their town is the best place to spend the day. "It's just a big celebration. It's a great time," says Ruth Thomas, 59, who manages Grandma's Café near the center of town. When Independence Day rolls around, she closes the café and gathers with her extended family to watch the parade. Up and down both sides of the 1.3-kilometer route—west from the cattle auction barn on Main Street, then north to the park on Linden—folks unfold aluminum lawn chairs or spread blankets over the sidewalk. Some have established places where they sit every year.

The parade usually starts around noon when a police car clears the way for a few uniformed soldiers carrying an American flag. When they pass, spectators rise from their seats. Many place their right hands over their hearts.

After a troupe of Boy Scouts marches by, a handful of dignitaries glide along, seated on the backs of convertibles, waving to the crowd and tossing handfuls of candy to kids. These cars are the first of many vehicles that together stretch into a virtual showcase of transportation evolution.

"If it's got wheels, it can be in the parade," Templeton says. Each year, in fact, the parade features skateboards, scooters, bikes, tricycles, golf carts, antique cars, antique tractors, riding lawnmowers, a limousine or two, semi-trucks and a couple of fire trucks swathed in red, white and blue bunting. There's even a drill team of local moms who push their kids' strollers in elaborate figure-eight formations.

One year, Larry Phillips, 55, a drugstore pharmacist, started what may become a new tradition. "We lined the back of my pickup with a plastic tarpaulin and filled it with water. We had kids swimming around in it. They enjoyed it," he says, grinning. Another year, he and his wife, Linda, joined the parade on a two-person bicycle.

Templeton, too, remembers riding her bike in parades when she was a little girl. "My bike was red, white and blue," she recalls. "It's all about our colors and our heritage." Another year, she dressed up as a cowgirl, and later, she twirled a baton and marched with the school's band. "We just did parades all over," she says.

Event planners from neighboring towns still schedule parades at different times to allow people to attend as many as possible, although Templeton now spends the whole day in Lamoni. She buys lunch from outdoor stands at North Park, where the parade ends.

"There are lots of food places. You can get hot dogs and hamburgers, and they have lots of apples and oranges and cotton candy," says Earl Black, 12, who marches with the Boy Scouts in the parade. He's a big fan of vanilla and caramel ice cream.

While vendors sell food from temporary stalls, some families prefer to pack their own picnic feasts of fried chicken, bacon-lettuce-and-tomato (BLT) sandwiches, corn on the cob, potato salad, baked beans, cherries, grapes, and, of course, Templeton's favorite: slabs of slushy red watermelon.

After lunch, "Grandma" Ruth often drives to a nearby town to watch her grandchildren participate in the annual rodeo. They rope cows, ride bulls, wrestle steers and run horses around lines of barrels. Although she enjoys the excitement, she says it can get a little scary. "Sometimes I get a little nervous," she says.

Back in Lamoni, most people end up at the park, where a carnival is in full swing. Giant inflatable obstacle courses dominate the soccer field, and there are enormous foam-rubber bodysuits for friendly "sumo" wrestling matches. The musically gifted—or simply brave—show off their karaoke skills on a temporary stage, and there's a homerun tournament over at the baseball diamond.

"You can pay a buck and try to slug as many balls out of the field as you can. The winners score a little cash at the end of the day," says Brad Carr, 49, director of student activities at the uni-

versity where Templeton works.

As karaoke winds down later in the afternoon, Carr steps up to the microphone to sing with a local rock band. "We're the kings of small-town festivities," he says, smiling. While they perform, a frenzy of kids jump around in front of the stage as their parents ease themselves into lawn chairs, chatting with friends and swatting the first mosquitoes of the evening.

After the sun slips down beyond the fields of soybeans to the west, fireworks start to burst across the sky. The best place to see them is up by the baseball field where they are launched, according to Black, the Boy Scout. "I like the ones that go WOOOOO!" he says.

A team of about 10 volunteer firefighters, in full uniform, is in charge of launching the annual show, paid for by the city. Richard Jackel, 53, has assisted for nearly 20 years. "The year before I joined, one of the fireworks came out of the pipe and turned right and slammed into the back of the [fire department] chief. It burned the coat right off of him," Jackel recalls, who suffered an injury a few years later when some sparks fell into his glove.

Despite the occasional risks—there hasn't been an accident for more than a dozen years—Jackel is proud of the firefighters' role in the celebration. "The Fourth of July reminds us of what we and all the other volunteer services—the police, emergency medical services—are here for in the first place, especially since 9/11," he says.

Not everyone, however, thinks the fireworks are such a good idea. Erma Beaty, 91, who volunteers at a second-hand shop, usually watches the show from her porch. "I'd discourage it if I could because of the war," she says. "That boom! Bang! Why spend money on that? Maybe I'm just too conscious of the suffering in the world."

For Beaty, Memorial Day, observed on the last Monday in May, holds much more meaning than the Fourth of July. Every year she goes to the local cemetery, where military veterans present a ceremony to honor soldiers who died during battle. "They do such a beautiful job," Beatty says, describing the service and the American flags that outline the cemetery hillside.

Although she supports many of the activities during Independence Day and acknowledges all the preparation they require, she wonders if some people miss the point. "I don't know if they know what they're really celebrating," she says.

Boy Scout Black, for one, seems to have a pretty good idea. "It's because we became independent from England—and we have a movie called *1776*," he said, recalling a film his class watched in school.

His brother, Raymond, 13, has a slightly different reason to celebrate the Fourth. "It shows respect…they had all the arguments and stuff about what to write in the Declaration of Independence," Raymond says. "I think it's pretty important."

Others disagree. Josh Johnson, 23, who grew up near Washington, D.C., and studies political science at the local university, doesn't get very excited about the holiday. "I just sort of block that patriotic stuff out. I'm glad we have all the freedoms we have, but I would honestly feel better if we weren't trying to be Britain all over again," he says. "We're trying to force people to believe what we believe. We're trying to impose democracies on other countries."

Wayne Bowers, 57, a retired middle school science teacher, attributes part of that antipathy to the September 11 terrorist attacks. "2001 has put us in a predicament about which civil liberties we sacrifice and which we keep," he says. "We have a lot of freedoms—that's always been part of my understanding of Independence Day—but I just think about how tenuous that liberty might be."

As for Templeton, who started the day by raising the "Stars and Stripes" up the flagpole, her understanding of Independence Day boils down to two things: her family and the freedoms they enjoy as Americans. Those blessings—and their connection to each other—have come into clearer focus since her son returned in December from military duty in Iraq. "I just hope we instilled all of those values in our kids," she says.

Every year, she recalls a lifetime of Independence Day celebrations with her family. She remembers, for instance, launching bottle rockets from her farm. "Of course, we don't shoot fireworks near the house anymore—we can't run fast enough," she says, chuckling.

Now she is content to simply watch what the firefighters send into the sky above the baseball field. "I'm the one that's 'oohing' and 'aahing,' " she says. □

About the Author: *Michael Morain is a reporter with* Juice, *a weekly newspaper in central Iowa.*

MIKE JAEGER

After the parade in Lamoni, families gather in North Park for picnics and games such as the three-legged sack race.